

# Experience of disadvantage: The influence of identity on engagement in working class students' educational trajectories to an elite university

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Pervasive socio-economic differences in relation to participation in higher education in the United Kingdom are particularly prominent in the most prestigious institutions. This study provides insight into why some individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds are successful in being admitted into one of these institutions. Underpinned by phenomenology, semi-structured interviews were carried out to examine the lived experiences of high-achieving students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds throughout their educational trajectories from primary school to a Russell Group university. Two main themes emerged from the data: identity and educational engagement. Various sources of disadvantage associated with material hardship, socio-cultural and interpersonal factors were strongly linked to identity and students' perceptions of their own social status. In turn, these factors and identity-related constructs associated with peer-group memberships, low expectations and negative group stereotypes affected how individuals engaged with education, contributing, for instance, to their lack of active involvement at school/college and poor attendance. However, identity-related factors were also found to influence individuals' educational engagement positively, including their motivations for overcoming obstacles, achieving high grades and pursuing HE. The barriers and facilitators discussed by these individuals have important implications for widening access to HE and thus require further consideration.

**Keywords:** disadvantage; engagement; identity; higher education

## Introduction

The proportion of students entering higher education (HE) institutions in all countries of the United Kingdom (UK) has increased despite the substantial rise in university tuition fees in England in 2012 [Independent Commission on Fees (ICOF), 2014]. However, students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds are still almost two and half times less likely to enter HE than those from more advantaged backgrounds [University and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS), 2015]. These socio-economic inequalities in HE participation are a cause of ongoing concern [Thiele *et al.*, 2015; 2016; Office for Fair Access (OFFA), 2016a].

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The recent HE Green Paper [Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS), 2015] sets out proposals to double the proportion of disadvantaged students entering HE by 2020. This emphasises the need to ensure that the HE system is open to anyone with the potential to benefit from it. Outreach initiatives are considered to play a central role in achieving these aims. Though the nature of these initiatives vary across different types of university; activities typically include work with schools and colleges to build study skills, expose and/or encourage students to apply to HE; pre and post-entry to university academic and pastoral support [Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), 2006; 2007].

Despite the prominent role that outreach activities are considered to have in 'widening participation' (WP) to HE, there is a dearth of research that has credibly evaluated these interventions and little evidence that these have been systematically informed by research (Gorard *et al.*, 2006; HEFCE, 2006; Thomas, 2011; Harrison, 2012). As such, research suggests that there is a paucity of research focusing on children's educational trajectories across all phases of education, though the relative merits of an intervention may depend on this (Ball, 2003; Byrom, 2009). The Sutton Trust (2015) has corroborated this, arguing that consideration of individuals' educational trajectories is required to understand fully the interconnections between family background, school, academic attainment and success in being admitted into HE. With the higher tuition fees, increasing privatisation and marketisation of the HE sector since the 1990s, such evidence is needed now more than ever to inform strategies that seek to widen access for socio-economically disadvantaged students within HE (Boliver, 2013). To this end, an important avenue for research concerns the exploration of factors that students from disadvantaged backgrounds perceive to be influential in relation to their participation in HE throughout their educational trajectories (Byrom, 2009; Crosnoe & Cooper, 2010).

### *Understanding socio-economic inequalities in HE participation*

Socio-economic differences in attainment are well documented among children from early ages and are frequently described as the precursors for inequalities in HE participation (Coley, 2002; Feinstein, 2003; Burgess *et al.*, 2008; McKnight, 2015). However, while differences in attainment contribute to inequalities in HE participation, the underlying reasons for these are complex and largely associated with the long-term negative effects of social, cultural and economic disadvantage (Hartas, 2011; Crawford, 2014; Sutton Trust, 2015). This resonates with Bourdieu's (1984) paradigm of cultural (or social) reproduction, which provides the dominant explanation for inequalities in student mobility (Donnelly & Evans, 2016).

Operating from this perspective, a plethora of studies has shown how those with lower access to capital (economic, social and cultural) are disadvantaged in various ways that can be detrimental to their educational opportunities and outcomes from early ages (Archer & Hutchings, 2000; Reay *et al.* 2005; 2008; 2009; HEFCE, 2015). As such, students from socio-economically deprived areas are more likely to attend poor performing schools, and come from families with little experience or familiarity with HE where underachievement may result from a number of challenging factors [Lupton, 2004; Burgess *et al.*, 2008; Department for Education (DfE), 2014].

Conversely, economically affluent students with access to the 'right types' of capital are more likely to attend competitive independent schools, or high performing schools, which facilitate their progression to HE and particularly research-intensive universities through high levels of support (Donnelly, 2014; 2015; McKnight, 2015; Sutton Trust, 2015).

While inequalities in HE participation in the UK are ubiquitous, these are most prominent at universities with the highest average entry requirements, particularly Russell Group Universities (Sutton Trust, 2004; 2010a; 2010b; 2015; Singleton, 2010). The OFFA (2016a) has corroborated this, indicating that the most advantaged 20% of young people were 6.3 times more likely to enter the more selective English HE institutions than the most disadvantaged 40%. Worryingly, this differential has changed minimally since the mid 1990s. Though differences in attainment contribute to these inequalities, students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to apply and be admitted to elite/top universities compared to more affluent students, and in particular those from grammar schools/independent schools, even when they have obtained appropriate qualifications (Sutton Trust, 2004; 2010a; 2015; Boliver, 2013; Donnelly, 2014).

Such findings are frequently discussed in relation to socio-economic differences in students' decision-making processes and the ways these are shaped by prior education/schooling, peer-group interactions, and social practices at schools and in families (Byrom, 2009; Kiernan & Mensah, 2011; Donnelly, 2015). Additionally, the role of institutional culture is frequently discussed, as the perceived risks of not belonging have been found to affect the entry and retention of students into different HE institutions (Archer & Francis, 2006; Donnelly, 2014; HEFCE, 2015).

### *The present study*

Socio-economic differences in students' experiences and decision-making processes, particularly after compulsory schooling, are relatively well documented (Forsyth & Furlong, 2000; Reay *et al.*, 2008; 2009). However, existing studies do not account well for variation in the decision-making process and educational outcomes of young people from the same background (Christie, 2007; Hodkinson *et al.*, 2008; Slack & Vigers, 2013). For example, Donnelly and Evans (2016) found that decision-making processes varied according to where individuals live and which schools they attended, even when social class was controlled for. They argued that while the social, cultural and economic capital upon which young people draw act as a powerful force, a wider theoretical lens is needed to capture the diverse contexts and frames of reference within which young people are operating. In light of these complexities, the current study follows a phenomenological approach to qualitative enquiry, as this views subjective lived experience as central to understanding, without imposing an *a priori* analytic framework to analysis (Schutz, 1972; Moustakas, 1994; Finlay, 2009).

Using this approach, the overall aim of this study was to examine the subjective lived experiences of 13 high-achieving students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds throughout their educational trajectories from primary school to the University of Liverpool (UoL). In doing so, this research sought to identify barriers that these students perceived to be influential from early childhood, as well as the

facilitators, which helped them overcome these. Due to the aims of the study a qualitative methodology that enabled students' voices to take centre stage was necessary (Maunder *et al.*, 2012).

Participants had all taken part in outreach programmes offered by the UoL to young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. By examining their educational trajectories to university, this research also sought to provide some insight into the influence students perceived outreach programmes to have on their educational trajectories to university. The OFFA's (2016b) strategic plan emphasises the need for such evidence, indicating that institutions must base decisions on 'the best evidence available, and prioritise activities that will have the greatest impact on the areas where they most require improvement' (OFFA, 2016b, p. 4).

Despite increased interest in the use of evidence to inform and monitor the effectiveness and influence of WP interventions, there is a paradoxical lack of such evidence, and concerns have been raised that these initiatives are limited in their capacity to enable opportunity and do not reach those students who may benefit from them the most (Gorard & Taylor, 2004; Mathers & Parry, 2009; Deakin, 2011; Thomas, 2011). In turn, there is also little evidence that monitoring of outcomes has been systematically used to inform WP activities, and the efforts made by teachers and schools to widen access to HE (DfE, 2014). The current study sought to provide insight that could be used to inform and monitor these efforts in the specific context of the UoL as an 'elite' university, as differences have been identified in the socio-economic/demographic composition of students even between elite universities, which may require specific attention (Sutton Trust, 2004; 2015; Singleton, 2010; Thiele *et al.*, 2015; 2016).

As one of the six original 'red brick' civic universities in the UK and a founding member of the Russell Group, the UoL is considered a 'high status' institution (Sutton Trust, 2010b; Thiele *et al.*, 2015; 2016). Compared to Post-1992 universities, which have been found to be a more prevalent option among working-class and ethnic-minority students, traditionally these universities attract a greater proportion of white students from more affluent or middle-class backgrounds (Singleton, 2010; Crawford 2014). However, the UoL campus is based in the city of Liverpool; one of the most socio-economically deprived areas in England (based on Lower Super Output Areas) [Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG), 2011]. The UoL attracts a higher proportion of local applicants than other members of the Russell Group and is considered highly visible in this context. These factors may contribute to the slightly higher proportion of students with lower socio-economic backgrounds attending this university compared to the Russell Group average.

## Methodology

### *Participants*

Participants were drawn purposefully from a cohort of 76 students that had taken part in WP programmes offered by UoL to year 12 students from disadvantaged backgrounds. They were informed about the study via e-mail, sent by the staff member responsible for delivering these WP programmes at UoL. The 13 students (4 males;

Table 1. Sample characteristics

Name*	Sex	Age	Degree programme
Melissa	Female	18	Psychology
Daniel	Male	18	Business Studies
Lauren	Female	18	Physics
Lisa	Female	19	Politics
Kate	Female	20	Physiology
David	Male	19	Medicine

\*Names have been changed to maintain participants' anonymity

9 females) who responded to register their interest in participating took part in this study. However, this article draws primarily on the accounts of six participants (see Table 1), to illustrate their experiences, and the impact of socio-economic disadvantage on the consciousness of these individuals in greater depth (Riessman, 2007). These six participants were selected purposively because they were considered a representative cross-section of the study sample in terms of gender, the subjects they were enrolled on, and the broad spectrums of experiences they discussed, which capture similarities and contrasting differences among them. The gender breakdown of the sample is reflective of global and national trends in HE participation, as females are currently significantly more likely to apply and enter university than males (e.g., UCAS, 2015).

The WP programmes that participants had taken part in are targeted at high achieving, disadvantaged students from state schools or colleges in Greater Merseyside, who are screened to ensure they meet the eligibility criteria laid out in Table 2. Socio-economic status (SES) is assessed based on parental education and household income information. Low household income is established by determining whether students are entitled to or in receipt of Free School Meals (FSM) or Pupil Premium (PP) payments, which means that their household incomes fall below a certain threshold, or their parents/carers are on income or disability benefits. As students fulfilled criteria used to assess disadvantage for participation in these WP programmes, they were considered eligible for participation in this study. Previous studies have similarly used household income and parental education information to assess SES and linked these to families' economic and cultural capital respectively (Bourdieu, 1984; Hatt *et al.*, 2005; Katz *et al.*, 2007; Harrison & Hatt, 2010; Stephens *et al.*, 2015).

### *Data gathering methods*

Phenomenological studies primarily rely on in-depth interviews to collect data (Creswell, 2013). Hence, a semi-structured interview schedule was designed as a means of eliciting individuals' personal stories and developing an understanding of lived experience. The interview schedule contained 10 open-ended questions that were structured chronologically around the key stages of students' educational trajectories, to help guide them through their experiences in a logical progression. For example, the first question asked: 'I would like to begin our conversation by asking you to tell me

Table 2. Criteria for eligibility in WP programmes at UoL

Eligibility	Description
Academic	Year 12 student currently studying two year, level 3 qualifications, e.g., AS levels, BTEC. Have at least 8 A*-C grades at GCSE (or equivalent e.g., GNVQ, BTEC) including English and Maths, 5 of which must be at grade B or above.
Family history of HE	Be from a family with little or no experience of higher education. For example, neither parent has attended university and obtained an undergraduate degree or equivalent in the UK or abroad. If one parent is currently studying for their first degree or they graduated within the last five years, applications will still be considered.
<i>Plus one of the following:</i>	
Socio-economic background	Be in receipt of or entitled to free school meals. Be in receipt of or entitled to discretionary payments/16–19 bursary/Pupil Premium at school/college. Have a household income of less than £35,000. Be living in or have lived in, local authority care.

about your experiences from when you were in primary school’. After asking participants about their experiences in primary school using this question in conjunction with a number of probes, they were asked: ‘How did you find your time at secondary school?’.

Though the interview schedule was structured chronologically, the interview process itself was iterative and involved going back and forth between topics to discern the implications they had for one another (Crotty, 1998).

### *Procedure*

Dates and times for face-to-face interviews were confirmed with students via e-mail. Interviews were conducted at the UoL over a period of three weeks. Before initiating the actual interview, participants were given information about the study and asked for informed consent. It was explained that interviews could last between 60 and 90 minutes (including debriefing), and would be recorded, but that participants would not be identifiable in any reports.

### *Data analysis*

Interview transcripts and field notes were uploaded to QSR NVivo (10) (Bazeley & Richards, 2000), a qualitative data management software programme. Thematic analysis was used as this can be applied to different theoretical frameworks, including phenomenological studies to explore the experiences of participants (Creswell, 2013). This study identified themes at a latent or interpretative level, focusing on the significance of patterns, and their broader meanings and implications (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Specifically, an inductive or ‘bottom up’ analytic approach to thematic analysis was used whereby analysis was guided by the themes that emerged from the data, rather than by prior theoretical accounts.



## Results and discussion

Thematic analysis was carried out and two latent themes were identified: (i) identity, and (ii) educational engagement. Each theme and their constituent sub-themes are described later, including their interrelationship(s); as identity-related factors were found to have an impact on students' engagement with education in both positive and negative ways.

### *Identity*

Within this study, identity is conceptualised from a psychological perspective where it is theorised as both an individual and a collective construct, comprising of both individual and collective dimensions (Ellemers *et al.*, 2002; Abrams & Hogg, 2006; Thibodeau, 2011). Three sub-themes reflective of the individual and collective sides of identity and the social processes that influence this were identified. These included students' self-evaluations, social comparisons and identity-related expectations. These sub-themes were interrelated as the way in which people perceive themselves is often influenced by how they feel others perceive and react to them (Hogg *et al.*, 2004; Derks *et al.*, 2007; Reay *et al.*, 2009).

*Sub-theme: Self-evaluations.* The experiences, beliefs and characteristics that students focused on in their self-evaluations, provide insight into their sense of self and who they are as unique individuals (Ellemers *et al.*, 1999). In self-evaluations, students frequently reflected on their own capabilities, primarily describing their own attainment as a consequence of being hard working, and often discussing this in relation to how they were perceived and compared to others. For example, as Daniel explains:

'Whereas they didn't care, I wanted to get a good grade (...) then because of that they called, (...) they nicknamed me, some of my friends they called me "Extra". Because I would do extra work.'

Daniel described his nickname 'Extra' with pride, and indicated how his hard-working behaviour differentiated him from other students in his group. This example depicts how differentiating characteristics, such as being hard working, may be perceived as markers of identity to students like Daniel. He stressed the importance of this in relation to his non-traditional educational/family background having emigrated to the UK under political asylum, when he went to school for the first time:

'I started school from year five, so I missed the bulk of primary teaching. When I came here I didn't speak English, or write any English at all.'

While the experiences and challenges Daniel describes are unique, students' narratives were often linked by a sense of difference, and a common perception of being 'hard working'. Further, the ways students described academic aspects of school often contrasted from those they described in relation to social aspects of school. As David explains:

‘Easy, the academics, erm. In short really, the difficult part would be fitting in socially. Fitting in socially was one of the main troubles I had.’

Like David, most students described social difficulties in terms of their sense of belonging, and ‘fitting in’. While David and other individuals appeared to cope with their social difficulties by downplaying the importance of socialising at school and focusing more on the educational aspects of school, others described school disaffection, periods of not engaging at school, and even temporarily withdrawing from school as a result of being isolated, excluded, bullied or stigmatised from peer groups at their schools. As Lisa states:

‘You would have people in my year that would just take the piss if you did try to do work, and ’cause I wanted to, they did.’

The social difficulties students like Lisa described as a result of their perceived commitment to learning were not uncommon among participants, and have been discussed in previous studies (e.g., Reay *et al.*, 2009). This may reflect the notion that success, including high academic attainment, is socially cultivated and not seen as achievement by certain groups or cultures, but rather the opposite (Gayles, 2005).

*Sub-theme: Social comparisons (group identification).* Individuals do not solely derive a sense of self (personal identity) through self-evaluations but also through social comparisons (Abrams & Hogg, 2006). According to Social Identity Theory (SIT) (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; 2004), individuals also base identity and self-worth on social categories to which they belong, such as gender, social class and ethnicity. Though the extent to which individuals perceive themselves as members of working-class groups is difficult to discern (as social class is not necessarily visible or a salient aspect of identity), students often described situations that highlighted the relevance of social class in their trajectories to HE (Hogg *et al.*, 2004). Most students expressed awareness of their socio-economic background in relation to receiving financial support for field trips, free school meals, and not having the ‘right things’ compared to others. Rachael, for instance, expresses her awareness of these differences in the following anecdote:

‘Like we didn’t have the right, the right clothes, the right phones, the right channels on TV and just always felt like I was missing a little bit, (...) it’s kind of more embarrassing when you are a kid cause you can’t really say like, “No it’s because my parents don’t make much money”, ’cause they’d just take the piss out of you if you say that. So I kind of had to like say “aww yeah I’m getting that soon” or just lie.’

The ways that students like Rachael describe trying to hide differences to avoid being distinguished from others indicates how class is not an entirely invisible form of identity to children. Similar findings have been reported in other studies where people described trying to conceal social class, and/or other characteristics that could be stigmatising or negatively perceived (Goffman, 1963; Granfield, 1991; Aries & Seider, 2005). Efforts to hide potentially stigmatising attributes (identity concealment) have been described as a way of coping with the well-documented negative stereotypes that people readily form on the basis of social class (Croizet & Claire, 1998; Spencer & Castano, 2007). However, students also discussed perceiving invisible class



differences in the emotional and social difficulties they faced compared to others. As Lauren asserts:

'Their family problems seemed so menial. I was like why is that even a problem? They were generally happier as well.'

Lauren's statement depicts how she perceives differences in the kinds of problems she experienced compared to other students who appeared 'happier'. Throughout her narrative, Lauren described facing various difficulties and disruptions that affected her educational outcomes in relation to her family, their lower levels of education, domestic violence, mental/physical health problems and poor economic circumstances. Though most students discussed awareness of not being affluent, not all of them experienced difficulties like these and their accounts differed widely in the impact they perceived their socio-economic/family background to have. In part, this was influenced by the extent to which they perceived differences between themselves and others, which may make characteristics more salient and more relevant in relation to identity (Aries & Seider, 2005; Archer & Francis, 2006). In turn, these findings could also be associated with relative deprivation, and hence the feelings that may arise when individuals compare their SES (based on income, consumption or other indicators of perceived economic welfare) to that of their richer counterparts (Chen, 2015).

*Sub-theme: Identity related expectations.* Students' narratives depict the influence of parents and teachers on their awareness of social class differences between themselves and others, illustrating how the identities individuals adopt can be imposed upon them by others (Maunder *et al.*, 2012). Their accounts frequently portray their awareness of others perceiving them as members of a group less likely to do well or less likely to 'fit in'. Kate's account provides one such example. Here she describes wanting to go to grammar school after doing well in exams.

'My mum didn't want me to go really. She just thought I wouldn't fit in there because her, one of her friends' sons went on a sports scholarship and got bullied there, 'cause he was quite like, he didn't fit in with the people.'

Kate's description of her mother's fear that she 'wouldn't fit in', illustrates her belief that, like her 'friend's son', her mother considered them to be members of a group with differences that are incompatible with those of grammar-school students. Four other students had similar experiences and did not attend grammar schools as a result. Further, though most students conveyed an awareness of being perceived as a member of a group that would not fit in, or do well, many of them discussed being strongly motivated to prove people wrong and succeed. For example, Melissa alludes to this in relation to her motivation to achieve high grades:

'Wanting to do better than what they thought. 'Cause there is a lot of stereotypes about like, people on benefits and stuff and I wanted to prove that, I wanted to prove that just because my parents were on them, that I wouldn't necessarily be on them myself.'

This statement highlights the way in which attainment may have a personal value to individuals like Melissa as a means of dispelling other people's 'stereotypical beliefs'.

Daniel also describes others', including his teachers', low expectations and feeling disadvantaged compared to others due to his background:

'Because of my GCSEs and because of who I am, so I said – I know all of the students are better than me but I have to show I am just going to work hard and prove them wrong.'

In this statement, Daniel appears to have internalised the belief that 'all of the students are better', but wanting to prove others wrong appears to drive his motivation to work hard, and achieve high grades in his academic qualifications. Lisa's desire to prove others wrong was her primary reason for wanting to gain a place at a prestigious university (in this instance the UoL), as she explains:

'I remember speaking to one of them, and saying that I want go to Liverpool Uni, and I remember them saying to me: "You, you won't get into the University of Liverpool, you should just apply to John Moores" and I (pause) I just awww, I just thought – "No, I'm going to The UoL". 'Cause like, I think, like when I feel the motivation for me coming to uni, and me doing well, more so than having a good future – it's to prove everyone wrong.'

Like Lisa, many students describe feeling misjudged in terms of their efforts and academic potential. The low expectations they describe are not atypical and may be reflected in the underestimated predicted grades that working-class students from less-successful state schools tend to receive compared to their independent school counterparts (e.g., Everett & Papageorgiou, 2011). As such, conflicting advice and low expectations may represent important barriers to other students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds and could help explain why they are less likely to apply to and attend elite universities compared to students from affluent backgrounds, despite obtaining appropriate qualifications (Reay *et al.*, 2008; Boliver, 2013; Donnelly, 2014). However, although low expectations were a source of frustration and anger to individuals, it may also represent another way that identity – including beliefs about how they are perceived by others – is linked with motivation, and the desire to prove other people wrong (Granfield, 1991). Kate's account depicts this, where identity-related expectations affected her engagement with education in positive and negative ways:

'I just think it made me angry (laughs) more like, I was already frustrated with the school and then it just made me more like, more like reluctant to go in but more determined to do well.'

Due to the peer group she associated with, a challenging school environment and factors such as her low attendance, Kate felt that teachers had low expectations of her academic ability. Despite having good grades, Kate and several other students felt they had to push hard to be allowed to take certain challenging subjects, and sit higher-level exams. Though students like Kate discussed their awareness of themselves as members of a group that was less likely to do well as a source of both frustration and motivation, there are risks associated with being perceived as members of a devalued group. Thus, it is important to keep in mind that the students in this study represent a minority of those who were successful in attending university and low expectations and stereotypes may be internalised and negatively affect many of those who do not continue on into HE. Derks *et al.* (2007) discussed this in a study that

exemplified how people who perceive themselves as members of groups that are socially devalued in educational domains (e.g., ethnic minorities, working-class students) are more likely to withdraw from these settings.

### *Educational engagement*

In this study, educational engagement refers to students' active involvement, commitment and concentrated attention in learning, and is contrasted with disaffection from education (i.e., apathy, or lack of interest in learning) (Fredricks *et al.*, 2004; Skinner *et al.*, 2009). As argued by Harper and Quaye (2009), engagement is seen as more than just involvement or effort in educational activities, and requires feeling and sense-making, as acting or participating without feeling engaged is just compliance. This was evident in the two sub-themes of educational engagement that were identified from students' narratives: attendance and decision-making behaviours.

*Sub-theme: Attendance.* Attendance and truancy are considered markers of engagement and school disaffection, respectively (Skinner & Pitzer, 2012; King, 2015). The majority of participants in this study described problems with attendance, often in relation to complex combinations of family, mental health (including, for example: depression, and anxiety) and social problems. Some individuals described preferring to work from home, due to disruption or social problems at their schools. For example, Kate articulates her reasons for non-attendance as follows:

'There was always fights, and there was always trouble. There was always like gangs in our school waiting for people like my peers (...) and then I thought (...) Why? I could be doing this at home. I'd probably get more done and less disruption at home so I'd just started staying off a lot.'

Throughout her account, Kate explained how she felt attending school had been more detrimental to her learning than working from home. In her narrative she also describes how her friends also had poor attendance and encouraged her to 'stay off' school. Similar findings have been identified in previous studies where non-attendance is discussed as a source of resilience or a protective mechanism to students in environments where ability and investment in education were perceived negatively and even stigmatising (Manor-Bullock *et al.*, 1995; Derks *et al.*, 2007; Quinn & Earnshaw, 2013). Additionally, this could represent a way in which social identity is linked to engagement, as working-class youths may appear to reject schooling, or downplay the significance of their grades to maintain group membership with other working-class youths who reject education as a way of resisting dominant definitions of success (Granfield, 1991; Manor-Bullock *et al.*, 1995; Gayles, 2005). Moreover, while the circumstances that led to periods of withdrawal and non-attendance varied between students, their stories depict how they attempted to cope and maintain some level of control over their educational trajectories, even where it was not always fully possible. Lisa describes this, and explains that her poor attendance was a result of problems at home, depression and unsettled living circumstances:

‘There was, there was a few months where I was between living in like women’s shelters and being homeless where there wasn’t a school for me to go to and so then after that age it just didn’t become a priority.’

Lisa, and other students with poor attendance, often felt that their difficult circumstances were not known or considered by others at their schools and influenced how they were treated. Without sensitivity to context, teachers may perceive students who are otherwise academically engaged as apathetic or educationally disengaged, and in turn this may affect how they treat these students (Gottfried, 2009; Trowler, 2010; HEFCE, 2015). However, not all students who experienced significant problems and disruptions throughout their educational trajectories had problems with attendance. For example, throughout his account, David describes his unsettled living conditions, experiencing various difficulties with his parents, but felt this did not impact on his attendance. As he explains:

‘I never considered skiving school or anything like that.’

In addition to not interfering with his attendance, David emphasises how he maintained focus on his goals despite adversity and periods of great difficulty. In one of his anecdotes he describes his performance in an exam after a fight involving him, his sister and his parents:

‘Yeah they attacked her. That was the morning of the French exam. I arrived late, because of everything and she was a mess ... I did fine, I came out with a decent mark as well. I don’t know how I managed that.’

After this incident David and his younger siblings were taken into care. However, this account highlights how challenging incidents like this did not affect his attendance or attainment. Such findings have previously been discussed in the context of resilience and particularly low SES students’ ability to cope with adversity (Reay *et al.*, 2009; Skinner & Pitzter, 2009). Hence, these qualities, which may be linked to students’ working-class identities, could also help shape their reactions to challenges/obstacles and promote their educational engagement (Skinner & Pitzter, 2009).

*Sub-theme: Decision-making processes.* The decision-making processes that featured most prominently in interviews were those discussed in relation to subject choices, and overall goals. Students’ descriptions of their decision-making processes and the inter-personal factors that affected these provide insight into their engagement with education in various ways. All students described their interest in particular subjects, and explained how this influenced their choice of subjects at GCSE and/or A-level. The majority of students did not choose subjects with career goals in mind, even at A-level, and displayed little active planning in relation to university choice until after their GCSEs. For example, Daniel and Lisa said that they did not know about university until after they had taken their GCSEs. Daniel, explains this as follows:

‘I didn’t know anything about universities. The first time that I noticed there was universities was when I joined the university with the WP scheme.’

Like Daniel, all students considered their participation in outreach programmes as important; however, the majority of them had already decided to go to university by the time they entered the programme. These findings are consistent with previous studies, which have found that pre-university interventions may not be reaching students early enough, questioning their influence and capacity to enable opportunity (Byrom, 2009; Deakin, 2011). However, the knowledge students had of HE and the extent to which their decisions were guided by specific career goals varied considerably among them. David, for example, describes choosing subjects based on specific career goals from primary school. Despite lacking external support and resources, he emphasises seeking information to guide himself, displaying a self-reliant independence and determination to study medicine. Though others also appear to be self-reliant, most of them also describe the influence of their teachers as important in guiding their decision-making processes. Additionally, most, but not all students describe being encouraged to go to university by at least one family member. Melissa, for instance, emphasises her mother's influence:

'She could see me thinking "I want to go to uni, I want to be the first person". I've got quite a big family, and she was pushing and saying, even she was saying: "Try and get out of this place"'.

Like Melissa, five other students mentioned being the first in their families to attend university as a strong motivation. However, they also mention disadvantages of being the first in their families to attend HE, particularly in having little academic guidance at home. Kate describes this, and unlike Melissa also explains that her parents were 'cynical' of post-16 education, and attempted to dissuade her from attending college and university due to financial concerns:

'Don't go, don't go, you are going to be in debt you're never going to get a mortgage.'

Throughout her account, Kate justifies why she thinks people like her do not attend university, describing her family's views and conflicting advice as a significant barrier. Previous studies have attributed similar findings to socio-economic differences in educational values, including how working-class people are less likely to believe that university has proven value than students from middle-class backgrounds (Thibodeau, 2011; McKnight, 2015). However, this also represents a practical issue, as those going straight into paid employment can contribute to family expenses straightaway. As such, participation in HE, especially for those students without a family history of participation in HE, is characterised by risk and uncertainty, where it may be easier to evaluate benefits of directly entering the labour market than the long-term benefits of attending HE (Maras, 2007; Brynin, 2013).

It is important to recognise that identity-related constructs can influence the ways that students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds may weigh criteria in evaluating whether to attend HE. Furthermore, identity-related factors may also underlie the dispositions of self-improvement that all students display and the motivations they state for pursuing HE, which they describe in the context of escaping adversity, moving away, or just generally wanting to 'do better'. This sentiment is exemplified in a comment made by Lauren:

‘University was my getaway plan because I really didn’t enjoy it at home.’

The motivation to escape her unsettled living conditions that Lauren describes, was also a strong motivation for Lisa, and David in particular. This may reflect a utilitarian perception of achievement, which according to Gayles (2005) can represent a source of resilience, which allows students to thrive. Ultimately, though students’ motivations and experiences varied widely, reflecting the heterogeneity of what it can mean to be disadvantaged, the value of academic success was recognised by all of them and seen as a way of improving their circumstances.

### Key findings and implications

This study depicts the interpersonal, environmental and cultural factors that may underpin differences in students’ subjective perceptions of social status and account for variation in the decision-making process and educational outcomes of young people from the same background. These factors, the negative group stereotypes and low expectations students frequently described, also appeared to influence their engagement related behaviours in both positive and negative ways. For example, though several individuals discussed being strongly motivated to prove others wrong and succeed, they also described low expectations as a significant barrier and source of frustration.

These findings have important implications for teachers, as it is important for them to recognise that students’ engagement-related behaviours may not be visible to others in environments where ability and investment in education are perceived negatively (Manor-Bullock *et al.*, 1995; Derks *et al.*, 2007; Quinn & Earnshaw, 2013). If these complexities are not recognised, teachers may perceive students who are otherwise academically engaged as apathetic or disengaged, misjudge their academic potential and predict them lower grades than they achieve as a result. Future research is needed to explore this hypothesis, as this can represent an important barrier to other students from disadvantaged backgrounds and contribute to differences in participation among different types of university (Boliver, 2013). This may be particularly critical in the context of Liverpool, and hence the UoL given the high proportion of socio-economically deprived areas surrounding the city and the disposition students from disadvantaged backgrounds appear to have for attending more local universities (Holdsworth, 2009).

It is important to note that two participants described not knowing about university until year 12 and that many of the students described having limited or no career guidance in their decision-making processes. These issues require investigation, and recognition by policymakers and HE institutions, as it is factors like these that prevent the widening of access to high-achieving students from working-class groups, and suggest that interventions may not be reaching them early enough. Moreover, outreach activities focusing on non-traditional students’ parents/carers could play an important role in helping to ensure that these students’ life chances and opportunities are not thwarted by limited guidance, knowledge or academic support in their educational trajectories.



### Limitations

It should be borne in mind that this study only included students who had been successfully admitted to university after taking part in outreach programmes targeted at disadvantaged students. Thus, while interviews yielded rich descriptions, students' narratives do not capture the full generality of experience. Further, despite the importance of measuring disadvantage accurately, among policy makers and the literature in general, there is a lack of consensus about how social class/disadvantage should be identified or where efforts should be targeted (Harrison & Hatt, 2010; DfE, 2014). These issues and the complexities that surround the targeting of disadvantaged students require consideration to identify accurately WP cohorts and widen access to HE. That said, targeted outreach programmes have shown accuracy in reaching those with no parental experience of HE (Hatt *et al.*, 2005) and it is reassuring that previous studies have used this, parental income and school-type information to assess disadvantage and predict differences in HE participation and attainment (Katz *et al.*, 2007; Stephens *et al.*, 2015; Thiele *et al.*, 2015; 2016). Moreover, the multiple commonalities and differences identified across individuals' narratives do much to enhance our understanding of socio-economic and educational disadvantage, and how this is subjectively experienced by individuals.

### Conclusions

The transition to HE and adulthood represents a highly formative phase of life, which is particularly influential to students' life chances and opportunities. By focusing specifically on socio-economically disadvantaged students' educational trajectories into HE, the current study identified barriers and facilitators that these students perceived as meaningful through this critical time period. While students' experiences varied widely, several individuals alluded to their family background characteristics, and schooling as sources of disadvantage. In turn, these factors, which appeared to be strongly linked to identity and individuals' subjective perceptions of social class, also influenced their engagement with education, including their motivations for overcoming obstacles, achieving high grades and pursuing HE. However, the social situations discussed by some participants – for example, domestic abuse-instability in their families, financial hardships, isolation and bullying at schools represent a few of the many barriers that may help to explain the well documented socio-economic inequalities in attainment and HE participation. Though these individuals negotiated the barriers and were successfully admitted to university as a result, it is highly likely that many more working-class students, who do not attend university, failed to do so.

While all participants valued taking part in WP activities, the current findings highlight the importance of providing students with information and guidance about HE and potential career options early so as not to restrict the opportunities available to them. In providing such guidance, it is important to recognise that decision-making criteria may be weighted differently by students from working class backgrounds where attending university is not the 'norm', compared to those from more affluent backgrounds (Maras, 2007). Ultimately, it is important that such evidence is used to

inform practical interventions, to promote ongoing engagement, and widen participation to disadvantaged students in HE.

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